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Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland: A new conversation for new times

Doran, P., Wallace, J., & Woods, J. (2014). *Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland: A new conversation for new times*. Carnegie UK Trust. <http://www.carnegieuktrust.co.uk>

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland

A new conversation for new times



Peter Doran, Jennifer Wallace and John Woods

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Peter Doran and John Woods, Queens University Belfast, and Jennifer Wallace, Head of Policy at Carnegie UK Trust. It reports on the outcomes of the Measuring What Matters in Northern Ireland conference which was organised by Jennifer Wallace and Georgina Bowyer for the Carnegie UK Trust in collaboration with Dr Peter Doran and John Woods of the School of Law at Queens University Belfast.

Thanks are extended to all the participants and speakers, to Ben Christman, who took notes, and to Anna Cooper who provided music on the lyre as delegates arrived. A special acknowledgement goes to our Chair, David Gavaghan, Titanic Quarter and keynote speakers, Simon Hamilton MLA, Minister for Finance and Personnel, Daithí McKay MLA, Chair of the Assembly's Finance and Personnel Committee, and to the Carnegie Fellow Sir John Elvidge.

We also thank the following conference speakers and active listeners:

Jennifer Wallace, Carnegie UK Trust

Dr Nat O Connor, Director, Tasc

Rob Warner, UK Office of National Statistics
Wellbeing Programme

Dr Kevin Sweeney, Northern Ireland Statistics
and Research Agency

Dr Peter Doran, School of Law,
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Conference Presentations and Related Links

Conference powerpoint presentations can be downloaded at: <http://bit.ly/mwmbelfast>

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What we measure affects what we do; and if our measurements are flawed, decisions may be distorted.

Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen & Jean-Paul Fitoussi,
Report by the Commission on the Measurement of
Economic Performance and Social Progress, 2009

*Good Living implies
having free time for contemplation
and personal emancipation; enabling
the expansion and flourishing of people's
liberties, opportunities, capabilities
and potentialities . . .'*

Cited in the Republic of Ecuador National Development Plan,
National Plan for Good Living 2009-2013: Building
a Plurinational and Intercultural State, 2010

*It is impossible seriously to maintain
that in some very important way we do not 'know
about' these problems. What prevents us, however,
from pursuing such action and such knowledge is
not plausibly a lack of data. It is much more centrally
a failure to integrate those data. It is much more
centrally a failure to make them real to
ourselves, to give them the proper frame.*

John Maguire, 'The Tears Inside the Stone', in Risk,
Environment and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology,
Sage Publications, 2000

Foreword



We wish to take this opportunity to thank the Carnegie UK Trust and the School of Law at Queen's University for their initiative in convening the Measuring What Matters conference and in launching a Roundtable to consider how we take forward a number of recommendations.

The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress ('the Stiglitz Commission') launched an important global conversation about much more than measurement. It is also about doing things differently and learning from our peers in other parts of the world, notably in our Nordic neighbourhood.

We trust that the Roundtable will be an ideal platform for an inclusive and creative dialogue that will also feed into a number of related developments here in Northern Ireland, notably on-going work on public sector reform, the reform of local government and community planning, and the Executive's commitment to Delivering Social Change. It is time to place the wellbeing of our citizens at the heart of what government is about, at the heart of a shared narrative.

Simon Hamilton MLA,
Minister, Department of
Finance and Personnel

Daithí McKay MLA,
Chair, Finance and Personnel Committee,
Northern Ireland Assembly

1 Introduction



The Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission¹ issued a profound challenge to all societies in 2009 when it reported on the latest thinking on measuring economic performance and social progress. That challenge has been amplified by some of the lessons we are drawing from the financial crises about the over-reliance we have placed on narrow economic indicators such as GDP². The challenge must also be viewed within the context of the unprecedented pressures we – as a species – are exerting on ecological or ‘planetary boundaries’³.

The Carnegie UK Trust has built on Andrew Carnegie’s core commitment to ‘wellbeing’ in the 21st century by contributing to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland’s responses to the international debate on measuring what matters (see box 1.1). In 2012, international research published by the Trust reinforced our view that, in the context of imaginative public sector reforms, Scotland has created a world-leading approach to wellbeing – in terms of deliberation, policy delivery, and measurement. Critically, Scotland’s approach has been pursued as an integral part of a far-reaching reform of public services, in partnership with local government.

The recent *Measuring What Matters in Northern Ireland* conference, organised by the Carnegie UK Trust in collaboration with the School of Law at Queen’s University Belfast was part of our continuing work with stakeholders across the United Kingdom and Ireland to explore how the concept of wellbeing can be used to promote social change. In Northern Ireland this work has a special urgency as communities emerge from generations of conflict. More than fifteen years after the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, some of the most enduring post-conflict challenges are – at their heart – questions of wellbeing. These include the equalities challenges, mental and physical health, community safety, resilience and good relations, pockets of inter-generational educational under-attainment, fuel poverty, weaknesses in environmental governance, and building social capital, to name a few.

Box 1.1 Carnegie UK Trust and wellbeing measurement

- 1 The Carnegie Roundtable on Measuring Economic Performance and Societal Progress in Scotland.** In 2010, the Trust worked with the Sustainable Development Commission for Scotland to establish a roundtable to identify and prioritise indicators on social progress, as recommended by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report. It made a number of recommendations regarding the National Performance Framework to better reflect a wellbeing approach⁴.
- 2 Shifting the Dial: From wellbeing measures to policy practice.** In 2012, concerned about the focus on measurement rather than policy use, the Trust worked with IPPR North to carry out international case study research in jurisdictions that were further ahead than the UK in using wellbeing data to inform policy change. The case studies included: government initiatives in the State of Virginia (USA), France, the City of Guelph (Canada), the City of Somerville (USA) and civil society initiatives in Canada (the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and the Vital Signs initiatives).⁵

1.1 The Northern Ireland Context

Box 1.2: Carnegie Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland

The Carnegie UK Trust is convening a Carnegie Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland. This cross-sectoral commission will work over the course of 2014 to explore how Northern Ireland can measure what matters. The recent developments within Northern Ireland provide a rich learning environment from which members of the Carnegie Roundtable can draw.

In his comments following serious city centre rioting in Belfast in August, 2013⁶, the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Matt Baggott, briefly identified a number of longer-term issues that must be addressed for those communities who feel left behind and where a sense of grievance is keenly felt. He referred to high suicide rates, high rates of health inequality, and low educational achievement.

Against the backdrop of a very public symptom of the region's unfinished business arising from a generation of violent conflict, the Chief Constable took the opportunity to remind us that the underlying conditions for many of Northern Ireland's citizens continue to militate against the realisation of wellbeing and a future with a strong sense of common purpose. Moreover, he

placed these observations in the context of the region's emergence from conflict in an attempt to explain some of the current challenges in embedding the political settlement enshrined in the Belfast Agreement/Good Friday Agreement of 1998⁷ and subsequent negotiations.

As our local politicians seek to steer the economy in a direction that services the common good in these most challenging times – locally and globally – it will be more important than ever to design policies and enable actors in a way that accurately anticipates impacts on wellbeing, builds resilience, and reflects critical links between the region's wellbeing agenda and the interdependent concerns of sustainable economic activity and political stability. Opportunities to strengthen these links are to be found in ongoing efforts to reform the public sector and in local government reform, with a new local government mandate on community planning and wellbeing. There are significant opportunities to embed the wellbeing agenda across the Northern Ireland administration in the context of a range of on-going government initiatives, not least the creation of a Public Sector Reform Division within the Department of Finance and Personnel, in the ongoing development of the OFMdFMs Delivering Social Change framework and within the administration's core commitment to equality, good relations and prosperity. A significant focus will also fall on the leadership role of cities such as Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Belfast has, for example, engaged with the international Smarter Cities initiative.



1.2 Some key themes

A key emerging theme from the conference was that a government focus on wellbeing – in terms of gauging outcomes and enhancing delivery for citizens – might help legislators construct a shared narrative. There was an early measure of convergence between the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton MLA of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and Finance and Personnel Committee Chair, Daithí McKay MLA of Sinn Féin. Noting that ‘not everything that can be measured matters, and not everything that matters is measured’, the Minister recalled the work of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission and commented on the results of United Nations World Happiness Report 2013⁸, which ranked Denmark and Norway among the happiest countries in the world. The Minister described how he had been examining the record of Nordic countries in terms of their economic performance,

tax regimes and dynamic approach to government, illustrating how there was more to life than adding up the pounds, shillings and pence. He added: 'We share attributes with our cousins in Scandinavia and should emulate their governance arrangements.' The Minister went on to describe his ambition to put the citizen at the centre of delivery in the context of his focus on public sector reform. With this in mind, he looked forward to learning more about the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework ('Scotland Performs').

Daithí McKay, the MLA who chairs the Northern Ireland Assembly's Finance Committee – with responsibility for scrutinising the work of Simon Hamilton's Department – addressed the importance of political buy-in and understanding of the wellbeing agenda alongside the role of leadership, public understanding and public sector champions. Above all, he called for collective cross-party leadership and for practical outcomes from the conference. Addressing the prospects for deepening integration across government institutions, he noted the wellbeing mandate that is to form part of Northern Ireland's upcoming local government reforms, and the prospects for government departments to abandon their silo mentalities that

have 'plagued politics here for too long'. Recalling the health and family benefits of his decision to take up cycling and use public transport, Mr McKay highlighted the links between a sound environment, infrastructure and public health, and echoed a recent call from the Department for Regional Development for more 'cycling revolutionaries'.

The wellbeing agenda does not arise in a vacuum. It is always taken up within a set of particular local circumstances. Alongside, and integral to, the generic issues of economic and environmental sustainability, the Northern Ireland context includes high levels of social deprivation and the imperative of addressing inequality as part of any wellbeing agenda. Northern Ireland's economy has flat lined for a number of years, with median income levels on the decline for three years. Poverty and social exclusion surveys indicate that one in three people in Northern Ireland suffers some form of deprivation. Lisa Wilson of Queen's University observed at our conference: 'The levels of our aversion to inequality will determine our assessment of wellbeing.' The same holds true for other profound challenges to wellbeing in Northern Ireland. Wellbeing can become part of a transformative conversation or merely an opportunity to rehearse what we already know. The choice is ours.



2 Beyond GDP... Beyond Public Performance Management

The wellbeing measurement movement is unusual in that it links together two very different developments in policy thinking. One of these relates to the limits of GDP as a determinant of social progress, the other relates the end of the usefulness of 'new public management' as a model for performance management in the public services. While both start from different places, and appeal to different interest groups, they end up with the same core recommendation – that we should use wellbeing measurement to focus any policymaking on what really matters to people.

2.1 Beyond GDP

The arguments against using GDP as the sole measure of social progress are well rehearsed, in particular through the influential Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report⁹. GDP measures the 'busyness' of the economy. And for a period of time, it was a reasonable predictor of social progress (though the economist who developed it, Simon Kuznets, counselled against using it in this way¹⁰). It was a barometer for whether things were getting better or worse – activity in the market can generate wealth and paid employment which, in turn, makes a lot of other things more achievable in society¹¹.

But from the 1970s onwards, economists like Easterlin began to realise that GDP and 'life satisfaction' did not go up in a linear way, instead the relationship appears to suffer from the law of diminishing returns – above a certain amount of GDP per head of population, improvements in life satisfaction are far less pronounced¹².

By the 2000s, a further issue was being recognised in the UK, that GDP had 'decoupled' from median incomes so, while GDP went up 11% between 2003 and 2008, median incomes were virtually flat¹³. While the use of GDP as the sole indicator of social progress was always questionable, this lost connection between GDP growth and the experiences of individual citizens presents a more fundamental problem. The failure of GDP as a measure of social progress offers an opportunity to reconsider what we mean by social progress itself and for us to develop systems that better 'measures what matters'.

This international debate on the limits of the use of GDP gathered pace in the fiscal crisis and it was led by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission, instigated by President Sarkozy of France, to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement¹⁴. Their conclusion

was that ‘wellbeing’ was a more useful concept, and that by framing our measurement systems around wellbeing, governments can better understand trade-offs between economic, social and environmental factors and ultimately make decisions to improve outcomes for citizens.

2.2 Beyond Public Performance Management

In the UK, New Public Management rose to dominance during the New Labour years of 1997–2010. It created a strong focus on measurement and targets, for example, improving waiting-list times or increasing the proportion of young people going into higher education. It was a welcome focus on improvement in a time of plenty.

By the mid-2000s, the academic literature was shifting from support for new public management towards measurement of outcomes. This was the result of a frustration that while targets were often met, outcomes for citizens did not seem to be improving. There were a number of theories posited for this gap, but the most persuasive came from Professor Christopher Hood who argued that public services had become adept at ‘gaming’, a way of altering the figures to ‘hit the target but miss the point’¹⁵. As Russell and Hayes point out, we had created a system which contained ‘the paradox of not measuring that which we do not invest in and not investing in that which we do not measure’¹⁶.

The argument in favour of a shift from New Public Management to outcomes-based performance management is based on the notion that managing performance on outcomes, rather than inputs and processes, will avoid gaming behaviour and more closely align assessments on performance to the experiences of the public.

2.3 Measuring wellbeing and linking it to policy development

Regardless of the starting point – a frustration with the dominant neo-liberal economic theory or a disappointment in the impact of performance measurement on improving public services – both critiques bring you very quickly to the same conclusion: that decisions about public policy would be better informed by the use of a wellbeing dashboard.

Different stakeholders use different language to describe the key elements that should be in a wellbeing dashboard. In the Carnegie UK Trust Shifting the Dial report, we looked at eight separate wellbeing indicator projects and found that they were remarkably similar. Table 2.1 shows the combined list of major domains and compares them with those from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Measuring Wellbeing programme, the OECD How’s Life analysis and the national outcomes from Scotland Performs.

While some wellbeing measurement systems have only one indicator per domain, others have multiple indicators making the analysis more detailed (for example, Scotland Performs and the Canadian Index both have a large number of indicators underneath each domain, 61 and 64 respectively).

What is important, though, is not to lose sight of the fact that these indicators are proxies for wellbeing, they are touchstones, and they are not perfect nor are they complete. For example, when we measure children's dental health in Scotland Performs, it is a proxy for those living in a household where the children are well cared for.

The difficulty of accessing high-quality data for all domains was raised by all of the international case studies explored by Carnegie UK Trust and is also evident in Northern Ireland. Selecting appropriate

indicators to act as proxies is as much an art as it is a science. The most recent work by NISRA on Northern Ireland data for the domains and indicators in the UK ONS wheel of measures represents the most advanced attempt to date to fill some of the gaps in locally available and comparable data.

Governments around the world (for example in New Zealand, Canada and Australia) have experimented with wellbeing dashboards which bring together key outcomes for citizens and communities and link these to policy development. In our international research, we found that wellbeing measures can be used in the policy cycle:

- To spark a debate on wellbeing
- To develop policies to advance wellbeing
- To evaluate the impact of policies on wellbeing¹⁷

Table 2.1: Domains of wellbeing used by wellbeing measurement initiatives

	OECD How's Life Report	ONS	Scotland Performs
Income	✓	✓	✓
Employment	✓	✓	✓
Housing	✓		✓
Health	✓	✓	✓
Work-Life balance	✓	✓	
Education	✓	✓	✓
Social connections	✓	✓	
Civic engagement	✓	✓	
Environment	✓	✓	✓
Personal security	✓	✓	✓
Subjective wellbeing	✓	✓	✓
Transport			✓
Leisure and culture			✓

Governments have also begun to focus on how to link these outcomes to the budget process¹⁸. The OECD refers to this trend as performance-informed budgeting which 'links the funds allocated to measurable results'¹⁹. The literature reviewed by Pidgeon suggests three reasons for the link between outcomes and budgets:

- it supports accountability and transparency and facilitates proper scrutiny of the budgets presented to parliaments and assemblies;
- it aids efficiency by improving allocation of monies and;
- it improves public sector performance.

The move from measuring wellbeing to policy development is not necessarily straightforward and the Trust's international work identified governments were having varied success in implementing this approach. We made a series of conclusions on how to embed wellbeing measurement in policy that apply to Northern Ireland as they do to the UK and other jurisdictions (see box 2.3).

Box 2.3: Conclusions from Shifting the Dial

- Wellbeing is an important **complement to traditional measures such as GDP**, rather than a replacement for them.
- **Leadership** is critical for this agenda to prosper. Without leadership to drive through change, we will be left with measurement systems that are not acted upon.
- Maintaining the momentum behind wellbeing will be eased if a **broad-based coalition of support** is established.
- To engage people with wellbeing, it is vital that the **presentation** of the data is user friendly.
- Both policymakers and wider civil society can use wellbeing measures as a way to monitor our **overall progress** and direction as a society.
- Wellbeing measures and an analysis of the drivers of wellbeing should be used to **identify policy gaps** and issues that are not receiving sufficient attention by policymakers.
- To ensure a wellbeing perspective is built into policy assessment and evaluation techniques, it should be built into **programme evaluations**



3 What Northern Ireland can learn from elsewhere

The Measuring What Matters conference heard from a range of commentators and practitioners from around the UK and from the Republic of Ireland. These contributions show what can be achieved with a wellbeing approach and suggest steps forward for Northern Ireland. As we begin to consider the lessons to be drawn from our near neighbours, it is also worth noting that the wellbeing conversation is an emerging global phenomenon. From Bhutan – home of the concept of ‘Gross National Happiness’ – to Ecuador, where the indigenous social philosophy of ‘buen vivir’ or ‘living well’ has come to redefine the very notion of development – our local conversation can draw on important new debates, often driven by civil society. The conversation embraces dimensions of the ethical, the social and ecological, and invites us to revisit our ideas of the public sphere. For Otto Scharmer, the wellbeing debate has begun to address just one of the ‘blind spots’ in our systems of governance and economics in this period of local and global transition. For Scharmer²⁰, an emergent future invites us to address the individual, relational, institutional and societal challenges of letting go of habitual responses. We are passing through moments of opportunity to sense and actualise emerging future possibilities that are both local and universal.

3.1 Learning from our neighbours: Scotland

Given the strong historic ties between Northern Ireland and Scotland, stakeholders at the Northern Ireland event were particularly interested to hear about the world-leading example of the Scottish Government in its reform of the public sector and embrace of the wellbeing agenda.

Carnegie Fellow, Sir John Elvidge, a former Permanent Secretary with the Scottish Government who played a significant leadership role within the senior civil service in progressing public reforms, refers to these collectively as the ‘Scottish Model of Government’ (see box 3.1).

Underlying Scotland’s approach is a determination to have government function as a ‘single organisation’, ‘working towards a single defined government purpose based on outcomes, and establishing a partnership based on that purpose with the rest of the public sector which is capable of being joined by other parts of civil society.’²¹ Strategic leadership and facilitation of co-operation between public sector bodies, local government and partner organisations is placed at the heart of this model of government.

Box 3.1 The Scottish Model of Government

In 2007, the Scottish National Party was in power for the first time as a minority government. They established a National Performance Framework to set out the longer-term aims of the government, including its agencies, and to track performance.

They set out the purpose of the Scottish Government as: *to focus Government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth.*

Progress towards the Purpose is tracked by 16 National Outcomes – describing the kind of Scotland we want to be – and 61 National Indicators, covering key areas of health, justice, environment, economy, and education measure progress.

Scotland Performs offers accountability based on national priorities set out in the National Performance Framework. As part of their rethinking of public services in 2007, the Scottish Government fundamentally changed the relationship between central and local government through a process called Single Outcome Agreements. These agreements set specific, shared outcomes for the CPPs, Community Planning Partnerships (bringing together health services, local councils, local fire and police services and others, including the local voluntary sector). The Single Outcome Agreements are based on the National Performance Framework, but with local flexibility allowing the CPPs to focus on locally-determined priorities. On agreement of the outcomes, financing is agreed, with no ring-fencing from the Scottish Government.

Informed by the apparent intractability of several problems with major social and economic impacts on the wellbeing of Scotland's population, Elvidge and the SNP government realised that the lack of positive change lay, not in an absence of resources, but in the institutional design of government itself. They concluded:

- a) That the Scottish Government and its senior civil service were not exploring sufficiently the potential benefits of being able to address the wide range of responsibilities within a relatively compact central government structure, which had close working

relationships with local government and the voluntary sector as well as with its own extensive range of NDPBs and Executive Agencies; and

- b) The strong emphasis on separate policy domains in the organisational structures of government was an obstacle to improvement.

The resulting reforms led to:

- An outcomes-based approach to delivering the objectives of government (The Purpose Statement);
- A single statement of purpose, elaborated into a supporting structure

of a small number of broad objectives, and a larger, but still limited, number of measurable national outcomes (The National Performance Framework); and

- A system for tracking performance against outcomes and reporting it transparently and accessibly (Scotland Performs).

At the same time, changes were made to the most senior levels of the Civil Service in order to take advantage of the pre-existence of a single leadership role and the match with the single leadership role of the First Minister in relation to the Ministerial pillar of government. The number of Directors General (the equivalents of Permanent Secretaries in the Northern Ireland Civil Service) was reduced and their responsibilities redefined, replacing their long established roles of heads of individual Departments and reinforcing that change through the abolition of the Departmental structure. The aim of this shift was to stress the primacy of contributing to the collective objectives of the team. The SNP had already committed, in their manifesto, to a similar emphasis on a small Ministerial team and an emphasis on collective objectives; and, on taking office, they reduced the number of Cabinet Ministers and sought to ensure the primacy of collective Ministerial working through Cabinet over Ministers' individual portfolio responsibilities

For Elvidge, the wellbeing agenda is being delivered as an intrinsic feature of improved effectiveness of government, with form following function rather than the other way about.

In reflecting on the model (in place since 2007), Sir John spoke of the resulting space for constructive dialogue between ministers and civil servants about how progress can be pursued most effectively, building a sense of shared endeavour. He also noted the way in which the new framework lends itself to the pursuit of a common purpose with those outside government whose co-operation is necessary or helpful in the delivery of outcomes – local authorities, public bodies, and voluntary organisations.

The Scottish model is now drawing interest across the Nordic arc. Sir John was confident that it has worked politically, noting that a minority Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) administration had returned to power at the next election in 2011 with a majority after the initial introduction of the reforms. Focusing on the contribution the reforms have made to an accessible dialogue between government and people, Sir John noted the enhanced levels of trust in government that followed the introduction of the new model.

Northern Ireland is currently in the process of reforming local government which gives this tier of government a wellbeing mandate. The Scottish model was also of interest insofar as the same outcomes framework as is used for central government is also the foundation of the 'concordat' with local government. The concordat fundamentally changed the relationship between central and local government through a process called

Single Outcome Agreements. This has led to a more ‘mature’ relationship between Scottish and local government, allowing for both national and local priorities to be acted upon.

Sir John explained that the Scottish model was not driven by an explicit decision to put wellbeing at the centre of the Government’s approach. Rather, this emerged from a decision to put outcomes at the heart of the Government’s approach and from a conviction that nations prosper where there is a commonality of purpose – where one common strategic framework guides the public sector and its partners.

3.2 Learning from our neighbours: The Republic of Ireland

If the Scottish experience relates closely to the move towards outcomes-based performance management, the experience in the Republic of Ireland shows how the concepts ‘play out’ in a debate about economic versus social progress.

Nat O’Connor, Director of the Irish think tank, Tasc, cast his comments on wellbeing and measurement in the context of the recent history of the Irish economy and the collapse of the so called ‘Celtic Tiger’. Paradoxically, he observed, Ireland’s ratings on international measures of subjective wellbeing are robust despite the collapse. However, in an observation that echoed the Stiglitz Commission, O’Connor lamented the

absence of key data – for example, on environmental impacts – during the height of the Irish economic boom fuelled by a ‘housing bubble’.

An early and influential intervention in the measuring what matters debate in the Irish Republic was made by the social partnership agency, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) study, *Wellbeing Matters: A social report for Ireland*²². More recently a decision was taken by the Central Statistics Office to introduce a subjective wellbeing measure to the national household survey in 2013 (see box 3.2 for a discussion of subjective and objective wellbeing).

Wellbeing, and associated concepts such as flourishing, has moved centre stage in a values-led debate that has arisen in response to the traumatic collapse of the Irish Republic’s economy alongside crises of confidence in other national political and religious institutions. Writers, activists, and the policy community are engaged in an attempt to re-imagine a ‘civic republic’ that would restore human flourishing as the end of all social, political, economic and cultural activity. While prompted by the national economic crisis, the debate in the Republic also taps into an older conversation in the social and political sciences around the notion of ‘development’ and human capabilities to function.

Box 3.2: Measuring wellbeing: Subjective wellbeing, dashboards and indices

There are three common ways that wellbeing approaches to measuring social progress have tackled this issue:

- To report **subjective wellbeing** as the ‘headline’ measure. This is the approach formerly given prominence by the Office of National Statistics in the UK and the one being trialled in the Republic of Ireland. A similar method has been used in France. Subjective wellbeing can provide an interesting ‘direction of travel’ figure and can be used to spark debates about social progress. Underneath the ‘headline’ measure, there are usually a range of indicators which are known to influence wellbeing. More recently, the ONS has placed greater emphasis on the full range of domains and measures.
- To report a **dashboard** of indicators. This is the approach taken by Scotland Performs. It is similar to Measuring Australia’s Progress, the OECD Better Life Index and Virginia Performs. This method appears to be the most common approach used by governments, and was promoted by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report. Dashboards help to develop new approaches to policymaking, particularly in relation to preventative and joined-up working. Governments using dashboards, like the Scottish Government, usually link this agenda to whole-systems approaches to public services and outcomes-based performance management.
- To report a **composite index**, a single figure made up of a number of indicators of wellbeing. This is the approach taken by the Humankind Index. Indexes can be simple equations based on the percentage change in indicators over a period of time (the approach taken by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing²³), or they can be weighted to emphasise certain indicators more strongly within the calculation of the final index number (the approach taken by the Humankind Index²⁴). Indexes like the Humankind Index appear to work best outside government to spark a debate. None of the governments we spoke to wanted to combine their dashboards into a composite index, but as a campaigning tool to raise awareness of general trends in wellbeing, they can be effective.

3.3 Northern Ireland: The current position

The UK Office of National Statistics began work on its Measuring National Wellbeing Programme²⁵ soon after Prime Minister, David Cameron, came into office. The UK uses a triple bottom line approach, drawing from data on the economy, the society and the environment and sustainability. While the majority of press interest is in subjective wellbeing, the approach also therefore includes a dashboard of wellbeing indicators (see box 3.2).

The UK approach is:

- to provide information to monitor and understand the wellbeing of the people;
- to help move beyond GDP as the main measure of social progress;
- to provide policymakers with information to take into account the impact on the wellbeing of people and the environment; and
- to support better decision making. Detailed policy appraisal mechanisms have been developed working with the Cabinet Office.

Dr Kevin Sweeney, Head of the Central Survey Unit at the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) told the conference that Northern Ireland is currently included within the UK ONS work. Northern Ireland data were included, for example, in the ONS First Annual Report on Wellbeing, published in 2012. In the most recent ONS report (2012-13), Northern Ireland had the highest average ratings for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness among the countries of the UK. A greater proportion of people in Northern Ireland rated their life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness as very high (nine or 10 out of 10) than in any other country.

The relationship between personal wellbeing and local circumstances is complex and the reasons why different areas of the UK have different levels of personal wellbeing is not yet fully understood.

In reflecting on the use of data from around the UK, Dr Sweeney noted some divergence between the data available in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK. These resulted in variations in the availability of local data. In the most recent data for Northern Ireland, on domains and indicators in the ONS UK wheel of measures, NISRA has worked hard to fill the local gaps in data sometimes with compatible, if not exactly comparable, data.



4 What should Northern Ireland do next?

The *Measuring What Matters* conference generated an insightful discussion and a series of questions that will – in one form or another – guide future deliberations on measuring wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

Three key questions are:

- 1 Can wellbeing help to create and shape a narrative for public services in Northern Ireland?
- 2 What does wellbeing mean for the equalities agenda?
- 3 What is achievable within the current government structures in Northern Ireland?

4.1 Building a Narrative

Northern Ireland's political institutions have emerged from a process of conflict resolution. Their design reflects as much an aspiration for communal and geopolitical accommodation as it does democracy. The early experience of government since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement has, consequently, been subject to internal and external pressures that have militated against the construction and delivery of a common purpose, and government has seldom appeared to be operating as a 'single organisation' at any level.

A key initiative to bring greater coherence to policy design, response and delivery is the Northern Ireland Executive's First

and deputy First Ministers' 'Signature Programmes' on literacy, family support and job creation, as identified in OFMdFM's Delivering Social Change framework (see box 4.1)

The operationalisation of the wellbeing narrative – as an 'organising principle' – is akin to a 'hologram'. The key working principle of a hologram is that the whole image is present within each constituent element. With the adoption of a coherent and robust vision of wellbeing, it may become easier for diverse parts of government and the public sector, at all levels, to work in the service of a common future. The whole vision of wellbeing would, in a sense, be present in each contribution from wherever in the public sector it is offered or enabled.

If we look at the components or domain areas of wellbeing, it quickly becomes apparent that Northern Ireland's policy priorities and debates are already inflections of a potential wellbeing narrative. Table 4.1 brings together the three dimensions of wellbeing identified by recent work at the OECD²⁶: a) Quality of Life; b) Material Living Conditions; and c) Sustainability of wellbeing over time (the challenge of greening the economy and fundamentally preserving what some have taken to calling our 'natural capital').

Box 4.1: Delivering Social Change

The Delivering Social Change framework was set up by the Northern Ireland Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It represents a new level of joined-up working across Executive departments to drive through initiatives which have a genuine impact on the ground.

Delivering Social Change is a new way of doing business, moving away from plans with long lists of existing activities towards a smaller number of actions which can really make a difference. It is about creating a new culture and focus on cross-cutting work to achieve social benefits.

In October 2012 the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced the development of six Signature Programmes under the Delivering Social Change framework. A seventh Signature Programme was announced in October 2013. These initiatives were set up to improve literacy and numeracy levels, offer increased family support and to support job creation within local communities – all of which were identified as being key priorities.

Evaluation of the Signature Programmes

OFMDFM statisticians are currently advising government departments on the use of common metrics, including wellbeing, in the evaluation of Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes.

This follows recent work by IBM for Belfast City Council on the IBM Smarter Cities Challenge where a common metric approach was recommended. The use of a common measure across a range of projects in different policy areas will enable a degree of comparison and maximise coherence of approach.

In addition to a measure of wellbeing, two techniques are being considered: locus of control and self-efficacy. It is intended to pilot these measures within evaluation plans for the six Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes. Locus of control and self-efficacy measures complement but do not replace individual project or programme evaluation metrics such as outcome and process measures.

The Office for National Statistics recommends including a subjective wellbeing question on life satisfaction for use in evaluation which can be broken down by domain e.g. relationships, health, work, finances, area, time, children. This one measure of wellbeing will be recommended in the evaluation of the signature programmes.

Most if not all of the elements that are identified by the OECD are already the currency of daily news coverage and political debate in Northern Ireland. Each domain identified by the OECD has a particular set of local registers (local debates), often coloured by local priorities driven by the fact that we are still navigating our way out of conflict.

The domains of wellbeing identified by the OECD are already the everyday concerns of people and organisations throughout the region. The challenge is to come up with a new compact with our democratic institutions and public sector – resulting in a narrative and a framework that brings greater coherence and depth to current, often fragmented, approaches to local policy debates.

Table 4.1

Domains of wellbeing and relevance to Northern Ireland policy debates

OECD DOMAINS	LOCAL POLICY DEBATES
<i>Quality of Life</i>	
Health	Impact of funding cuts
Work and life balance	Impact of debt and unemployment
Education and skills	Youth unemployment
Social connections	Segregation, isolation, suicide
Civic engagement and governance	The shadow of sectarianism`
Environmental quality	Public trust and planning reform
Personal security	Sectarianism/freedom of speech
Subjective wellbeing	Invisible victims of trauma/conflict
<i>Material Living Conditions</i>	
Income and wealth	Fragile Economy
Jobs and Earnings	Inequality
Housing	Segregation
<i>Sustainability of well-being over time</i>	
Natural Capital	Reform of planning
Economic Capital	Fragile private sector
Human Capital	Youth Unemployment
Social Capital	Civil Society/Community Sector

In taking forward this conversation on the meaning of wellbeing in our own regional context, it will be important to integrate – and perhaps recast – existing priorities as brought forward through the democratic process and reflected in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government. For example we might ask:

How might we begin to recast our vision for a 'united community' around notions of wellbeing? In other words, what price – in terms of wellbeing – do we pay for continuing divisions and segregation?

Going further, we might consider how an enhanced sense of wellbeing in our communities can – in all likelihood – contribute to the confidence and stability required to build a more inclusive, equal and settled society where people are more at ease with themselves and with one another. Have we begun, for example, to consider the qualities of mind (beyond consideration of mental health) that might best support the construction of a new public sphere and capacity for open-ended and self-transforming conversations?²⁷

4.2 The Equalities Agenda

The dichotomy between so called 'real politics' or 'bread and butter issues' (jobs, housing, education) *and* the seemingly intractable legacy issues (symbols, the past, victims) that seem to dominate much of the energy of the main political parties is sometimes over stated. In attempting to force a separation of these approaches to political priorities we can risk losing sight of the linkage

between the two, or the way in which ways of understanding and tackling the so called 'bread and butter issues' are often embedded in and coloured by the challenges of dealing with legacy issues. Consider, for example, the critical role of socio-economic issues and the State's responses to these in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the onset of the 'Troubles'. Wellbeing offers, potentially, a more nuanced discourse or framework. Wellbeing entails a generic agenda (equalities, health, employment, safety, participation, governance) but must also draw deeply from its context for learning and relevance. The unavoidable legacy issues with which Ambassador Richard Haass and the Executive parties have struggled recently – have profound implications for dimensions of wellbeing. They provide a distinctive prism through which to examine the more generic issues such as jobs, housing, health, education and participation. Wellbeing is both a means and an end in the context of the process of enabling flourishing and 'united' communities, a process that will demand the cultivation of skills and capabilities supportive of a political culture that is more accommodating of deep listening, empathy, and a creative openness to a co-authored future.

Consider, for example, the interaction between the experience of poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland, where 30% of households fall below what is deemed society's minimum standard for an acceptable quality of life.²⁸ The experience of inequality and social exclusion can interact powerfully with citizens' perceptions around their

decisions to participate in civic life. Inequalities in resources can lead people in lower economic brackets to refrain from participating either because they have fewer resources or because they believe that getting involved will be fruitless because the system is stacked against them²⁹. When these mechanisms are mapped onto the context of Northern Ireland the implications are far reaching and potentially destabilising, given the available avenues for dissent and alienation.

4.3 Working within current government structures

The wellbeing agenda raises a number of capacity building challenges at each stage in the policy cycle. Much more than an overarching narrative and a framework for measuring outcomes, it can also imply ‘doing’ things differently. Not least within the public sector. The wellbeing narrative can play a key role in assisting the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM) and other Executive Departments in redefining themselves as key enabling organisations working with NDPBs, agencies and local government, and with civil society, towards a common purpose based on agreed outcomes. A formative period in the evolution of governance at the Northern Ireland Executive level has coincided with the emergence of far reaching insights into the nature of leadership and possibilities for collaborative policy design and delivery networks across the

world. Wellbeing is just part of a global conversation that is part of a much bigger transition in governance styles.

At the root of the wellbeing agenda is a radical idea: not all satisfiers of human wellbeing can be reduced to an ‘algorithm’ or monetary value. Not every solution demands a new budget. A paradigmatic policy response, in the context of wellbeing, is a greater focus, for example, on preventative measures that can reduce costs and enable a greater sense of ownership and design of solutions by individuals and communities where departments and other parts of the public sector are able to come together in problem-solving mode³⁰. A wellbeing approach may suggest: jointly addressing health, transport, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability; mental health, civic participation and social inclusion; the integration of senior citizens into childcare support; embracing emerging models of peer-to-peer collaboration to address energy security and new models of consumption-production.

There are compelling reasons for the integration of public sector reform considerations and the adoption of an over-arching wellbeing narrative that can act as a guide to policy and service delivery, including:

- A comprehensive approach to the design of future Programmes for Government and the role of reformed local government in the context of councils' new responsibilities (leadership in community planning and wellbeing) could underpin and deepen a culture of partnership and accountability, and a citizen-based approach to policy design and delivery, with an outcomes focus.
- The current structure of incentives for collaboration across Executive departments and other parts of government (notably at senior and middle ranks) could be enhanced by:
 - Embracing a standing deliberative and participatory approach to seeking agreement on a shared wellbeing narrative and set of outcomes; and
 - Reforming the incentive structures for effective communication and collaboration across Executive Departments and between government, civil society, business and industry, and the higher education sector.
- It may be worth considering to what extent it is possible – given the political constraints linked to the history and function of our departmental structures – to deconstruct the culture of 'departmentalism' as an embedded operational culture. All of this implies enhanced levels of trust and leadership across parts of government as senior and middle ranking civil service and public sector administrators come to view themselves (and are incentivised) to act as enabling agents rather than top-down managers in a culture that is more tolerant of experimentation and less risk averse. This entails not only institutional mechanisms but a deep culture shift in the public sector.
- A number of the most challenging policy areas that will come to occupy the public sector in coming years (environmental sustainability, climate change, energy security, new economic activity, life-long learning) will be less and less amenable to traditional problem-solving approaches. Growing complexity will demand a clearer values-led consensus across society on preferred futures and outcomes. This will demand new skills within government and new levels of engagement with stakeholders across society as Northern Ireland, collectively, will be challenged to adopt and adapt.



5 Next Steps

The dilemmas outlined above invite serious reflection on the potential contribution of the wellbeing agenda pursued along several dimensions:

- **Narrative:** Adopting wellbeing as the means and the ends of a 'narrative' supported by its adoption as an 'organising principle' that puts people and the environment at the centre of a renewed vision of governance and partnership;
- **Conceptual:** A shift towards a rich, shared and deep appreciation of the local conditions (e.g. culture, scale) that make for flourishing, and confident communities with the capabilities required to engage constructively in co-authoring an open future;
- **Institutional:** Public sector reform designed to shift the burden of delivery away from a top-down managerialist culture and create an enabling administration across regional and local government in partnership with communities and wider civil society; with standing mechanisms to ensure a focus on outcomes, impacts and accountability.

Such a shift would not only begin to address some of the political constraints on the current operation of the Executive Offices and Departments, but would prompt a wider and perhaps more far-reaching consideration of the profound shifts in governance taking place in other parts of the world. The enabling paradigm of government will be much better prepared to respond to and incorporate the impact of emerging transformations in peer-to-peer collaboration in a host of activities, ranging from production/consumption, energy security to education and the delivery of services.

A number of possible next steps to take the conversation forward have been proposed:

- The integration of Northern Ireland's wellbeing conversation into the Government's programme on public sector reform, with due consideration to a paradigm shift towards an enabling culture of leadership, trust and partnership. This could entail an extension or deepening of the OFMdFM's framework on Delivering Social Change;

- The adoption of an outcomes-based approach to delivering the objectives of government and a system for tracking performance against outcomes and reporting it transparently and accessibly (with standing mechanisms for input from local government and civil society)
- The cultivation of stronger ties between the Northern Ireland Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly (and local government and civil society) with our Scottish counterparts and those throughout the Nordic arc; and
- A programme of public sector training events and international exchanges (focusing on the Nordic experience) but extending to other parts of the world, including, for example, the Republic of Ecuador, where wellbeing has been placed at the heart of the national development plan.

Carnegie Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland

The Carnegie UK Trust is delighted to announce that it will support a roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland. The roundtable will investigate the issues raised in this report throughout 2014 with a view to setting an ambitious but achievable 'routemap' for future government and civil society activity on wellbeing.

The roundtable will be co-chaired by Martyn Evans of the Carnegie UK Trust and the secretariat will be provided by Peter Doran (Queens University Belfast) and John Woods (Queens University Belfast). Further information on membership and papers will be available at <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/changing-minds/enterprise-and-society/measuring-progress,-measuring-wellbeing>

One of the key lessons to be drawn from the Trust's previous work on measuring wellbeing is the key role played by political leadership. The Roundtable in Northern Ireland has been launched with the active participation and support of a number of local political leaders, including Minister Simon Hamilton and Committee Chair, Daithí McKay.

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